

Hooray for Weeds!

Weeds are the uninvited guests of the plant world. They sprout up in yards, gardens, forests, pastures, and even in the cracks of streets and sidewalks. They can put down roots in places where other plants can't grow at all. Gardeners don't like to see weeds, but weeds are important in many ways.

Like other green plants, weeds capture the energy of the sun and turn it into food. As the weeds absorb water, their roots pull in vitamins and minerals from the soil. When animals eat the roots or other parts of the weeds, they add needed nutrients to their diets. Muskrats take in nutritious vitamins and minerals when they eat cattails. Gophers and mice thrive on the tasty roots of many different weeds. The seeds and berries that some weeds produce are valuable food sources for insects, birds, and other animals. Even humans enjoy eating some kinds of weeds.



Chickweed

Both man and beast can eat all parts of common dandelions. This weed is rich in vitamins A and C and also contains important minerals. In spring, dandelion leaves can be picked and boiled to eat as a leafy green vegetable that tastes a little like spinach.

Before the buds open, the dandelion's yellow flowers can be picked and then roasted, and dandelion roots can be boiled to make tea. Rodents feed on dandelion roots, bees gather pollen and nectar from the flowers, and horses eat the leaves.



Dandelion

Like dandelion leaves, chickweed leaves can also be gathered and cooked like spinach. Although it is not welcome in lawns and gardens, chickweed is a nutritious plant.

Weeds can be sources of calcium, which is an important mineral for the healthy growth of bones and teeth. When an animal dies, its bones deposit calcium in the soil.

The roots of weeds and other plants absorb the calcium. The plant you eat today might contain calcium that was in the skull of a saber-toothed tiger!

Weeds deposit calcium in the soil, too. As weeds die and decay, the calcium they have absorbed goes back into the soil. When soil is washed into a stream, river, or ocean, algae and other microscopic water plants absorb the calcium. Then fish eat the plants, and the people and other animals that eat the fish also benefit from the calcium.

Weeds help the soil in many ways. They loosen it with their roots so that insects and other animals can dig more easily. As dead weeds decay, bacteria and fungi in the soil break them down to form more soil. When fires destroy forests and grasslands, fast-growing weeds often sprout up to hold the soil in place until new trees grow. The roots of weeds, trees, and other plants hold rich topsoil in place so it won't be carried away by wind or heavy rains.

By holding the soil in place, weeds help prevent erosion and keep rivers and streams from becoming clogged with mud and chemicals. Fish and other animals that live in or near rivers and streams die when they don't have clean water. Sediment-choked rivers can flood fields, cause damage to food crops, and prevent hydroelectric power plants from operating properly—or at all!

The benefits of humble weeds don't stop with the soil either. Giant weeds may act as shields to slow strong winds. Prickly weeds, such as the thistle and the wild rose, shelter rabbits, birds, and other small animals. Hawks and large predators can't get through stickers, thorns, and brambles to find their prey.



Thistle

Weeds are very important to the plant and animal kingdoms and help make the world a better place to live. The next time you see dandelions, chickweed, thistles, cattails, poison ivy, or any other kinds of weeds, tell them “thanks” for a job well done or just say, “Hooray for weeds!”

Questions About Hooray for *Weeds!*

1. Why are weeds considered to be nutritious?
2. How do people typically prepare the following dandelion parts for eating?
 - a. flowers:
 - b. leaves:
 - c. roots:
3. How do some fish become a source of calcium for people and other animals?
4. How do weeds help prevent soil erosion?
5. Name three problems that may arise when erosion clogs rivers and streams with mud and chemicals.
6. Why might a farmer disagree with the title of this story?

Vocabulary

A. Record the letter for each word's definition.

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|---------------|--|
| 1. nutrients | a. to place or set down |
| 2. sprout | b. a mineral that helps build strong bones |
| 3. calcium | c. the wearing away of soil |
| 4. absorb | d. healthful; containing nutrients |
| 5. deposit | e. to drink in or soak up |
| 6. nutritious | f. the fine sand and soil at the bottoms of lakes and rivers |
| 7. decay | g. to begin to grow |
| 8. topsoil | h. to break down or decompose |
| 9. sediment | i. vitamins and minerals |
| 10. erosion | j. the layer of dirt at the ground's surface |

B. Use words from the list above to complete the sentences below.

1. Decaying weeds _____ vitamins and other into the soil.
2. The calcium that weeds _____ from the soil is passed on to the animals that eat the weeds.
3. The strong roots of fast-growing weeds help keep _____ from washing away.
4. Weeds are hardy plants that can _____ up in places where other plants can't grow.

5. Strong winds and heavy rains are natural causes of _____ .
6. Too much _____ in rivers keeps them from flowing freely.
7. Algae absorbs _____ and other minerals from the soil that is washed into ponds and rivers.
8. As weeds _____, they break down to form more soil.

Synonyms and Antonyms

A. Read each pair of words below. Write S if the words are synonyms. Write A if the words are antonyms.

- | | |
|---------------|-----------|
| 1. decay | rot |
| 2. thrive | wither |
| 3. capture | release |
| 4. nutritious | healthful |
| 5. uninvited | welcome |
| 6. soil | dirt |
| 7. benefit | harm |
| 8. shelter | protect |
| 9. clogged | blocked |
| 10. prickly | smooth |

B. Read each sentence below. Use editing marks to cross out the word that is wrong and replace it with the antonym used in the story to make the sentence read correctly.

1. Dandelions are uncommon weeds.
2. Algae are huge water plants found in ponds, rivers, and oceans.
3. Some weeds produce seeds and berries that are worthless sources of food for animals.
4. Sediment in rivers can cause floods that repair food crops.
5. The roots of weeds tighten the soil so that insects and other animals can dig more easily.
6. By holding the soil in place, weeds help cause erosion.

Facts and Opinions

A nonfiction story contains facts, or information that can be proved. It may also contain opinions, which are beliefs that are supported or confirmed by facts.

A. Read each opinion below and write a fact from the story that supports the opinion.

1. Opinion: Weeds help make the world a better place to live.

Fact:

2. Opinion: Weeds are the uninvited guests of the plant world.

Fact:

3. Opinion: Humans enjoy eating weeds.

Fact:

4. Opinion: Weeds help the soil.

Fact:

5. Opinion: The benefits of weeds don't stop with the soil.

Fact:

B. Write an opinion you have about weeds. Support your opinion with facts from the story.